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# For My Friends Who Speak to Me in Quiet

**Nishhza Thiruselvam**

## **Abstract**

Last year, I was grieving the loss of my dad's little brother, my Uncle Kumar. I wrote this poem the night that I attended his memorial service over Zoom. My uncle will always have a special place in my heart. I moved to New Zealand from Malaysia in 2004 when I was 14 years old. A year later, my parents and my little sister followed. Every visit back home to Malaysia for the next 15 years, Uncle Kumar would be there to greet us at the airport. His familiar face would be the first to greet us when we landed, and the last to see us off when we left. I miss the feeling of seeing his warm smiling face in the KL airport's arrival area. Climbing into the familiar comfort of his car in Malaysia's thick humid air was always my first warm welcome home. In this poem I remember my Uncle Kumar, with whom I enjoyed sharing space with in both conversation and in quiet; The quiet tears he tried to hide while driving me back to the airport at the end of my visits home; The quiet meals I shared with him while scrolling through my phone; The quiet drives home during my childhood, when my parents were busy at work and weren't able to pick my sister and I up from school that day. He loved being our uncle. He never outright said so, but he showed us how much he did. Uncle Kumar always showed up and I am so deeply blessed to have known and loved him. He is a person I learned so much from, and whose demeanour and temperament I so often see in myself. My world changed when you left us, and we miss you so much.

## **Keywords**

poetry, ancestors, unspoken understandings, magic

I find closeness in moments of unspoken understanding,  
moments of mutual appreciation of the unsaid,  
moments when our silence allows us to speak with our eyes and with our smile,  
and in those moments,  
it's like we start to hold each other close without physical touch.  
Sometimes we speak to one another  
without looking at each other,  
when we sit in silent appreciation,  
and in our silence there is an exchange.

In these moments we seem to know  
that who we are  
is who we ever were,  
and who we ever were  
is everyone we ever knew  
and everyone we ever knew  
are all those who ever meant something to us  
and when you and I,  
when we share our moments of this lovely quiet,  
a space clears for the wholeness of our existence.  
We are so much.

When I think about our ancestors,  
You see,  
when I think of who I ever was  
and who you ever were,  
I think of the way we carry in us all who came before us.  
The most subtle of our gestures,  
subtleties in expressions when we speak,  
intricacies in our lines of thought,  
paths taken by our minds when we think.  
Our ways precede us in our lineage and  
that is how they continue to exist in us now.  
Magic.  
And you and I, we exist in each other  
because we mean something to each other.

You exist in me,  
and in my mind,  
and in the way I hold my head up high,  
and every time you make me smile  
you continue to linger in the creases of my face  
and I like that you stay there for time to come.

When I gather with family elders,  
these subtleties in expression,  
they take on explicit relevance.  
My elders, as we speak,  
connect these subtleties in my expressions  
to my grandmother or to a great uncle I never met;  
They say,  
the way my dad rubs his head when he thinks,  
that's the way his grandfather used to do it.  
And as my elders speak,  
I can't help but marvel  
Because traced inside me I will always find them  
and in finding them I find the universe,  
and in spending time with my elders,  
A picture of who and where I come from  
becomes a little more clear.  
What is this if not the most marvellous existence?

And in our quiet my friends,  
when you recognise something in me without me  
needing to speak, you have acknowledged  
and welcomed an ancestor into our space  
and I love you for how you honour them.

## **Acknowledgements**

For my family who taught me collectivist values, so much so that neoliberal individualism is jarring in its isolation and over valuing of the individual.

## **Author Biography**

Nishhza Thiruselvam is an Auckland based Malaysian born Tamil whose ancestry traces back to Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and to Tanjavour in India's southernmost state of Tamil Nadu. She is the proud daughter of migrant parents, and a grateful older sibling for her brilliant big hearted little sister. When she is with her family back home, there is no place else she would rather be.